

Mike's List by **pathvain aelien**

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Summary: Mike has an unusual Christmas list.

Mike's List

Thank you to every person who has read, reviewed, favorited or messaged me about my fics. You guys are amazing, so I decided to write a little Christmas fic for you. (Okay, okay. I also just couldn't resist.) Whatever holiday you celebrate (or if you celebrate at all), I hope you all have a great day.

A/N: This fic takes place somewhere in between "The First Christmas" and "Eleven's Presents," but also exists as a stand-alone fic. You won't be lost if you haven't read those.

Mike's List

"What are you working on?"

Dustin asks the question absently, because his attention is mostly focused on a rousing game of Scrabble. Dustin's currently in the lead, which is usually how the game goes unless Mike's playing. No one ever actually wins, because Lucas always grabs a dictionary to nitpick every single word. He really hates to lose. A few minutes after that, Dustin always wrestles the dictionary away from him and analyzes all of *Lucas's* words. The game usually ends with Will and Mike irritably shoving the board away (or in one memorable case, throwing it across the room and scattering scrabble tiles everywhere. It took them an hour just to round up all the q's) while Lucas and Dustin try to throttle each other. Mike eventually put his foot down, no more freaking scrabble. Ever.

But that was a few months ago and the guys have taken advantage of Mike's distraction to sneak the board out from the garage. He's on the couch, scribbling in a spiral notebook and he hasn't looked over since, even though Lucas is starting to snarl and he'll be up searching for the dictionary any minute now.

Dustin loses interest in Mike temporarily, as Lucas hops up from the table and rummages through Mike's books, muttering under his breath until he locates the Webster's. Dustin rolls his eyes as Lucas irritably rifles through the pages before glancing back at Mike.

"Mike! *Earth to Mike!*"

Mike doesn't even look up. He's underlining something in his spiral.
"Yeah, go ahead."

Dustin and Will meet each other's eyes. Will snickers. "Go ahead and *what*, exactly?"

"Whatever you wanted. Just go ahead. Ice cream or something?"
Mike's voice is vague and he still hasn't bothered to spare them a glance.

Dustin sighs. "*Jesus*," he mutters, before delving into the scrabble bag. He extracts a couple of letters (*I* and *D*, the first two letters of "idiot" and therefore entirely appropriate) and hurls them as hard as he can in Mike's general direction.

Dustin smirks as the letters find their mark. He particularly enjoys the clicking sound as they bounce off of Mike's forehead and the corner of his right eye, respectively. Mike drops his pen and sits up straight, clapping a hand to his eye as it starts to water.

"Jesus! What the hell was that for?"

Dustin leans back in his chair, straightening his hat. "That's for ignoring your best friend, idiot."

Mike glares at him with his good eye. "I wasn't ignoring you! I *said* you could have ice cream!"

Will giggles again and Mike includes him in his glare. It's an all-purpose glare.

"I didn't ask for fucking *ice cream*, Mike," Dustin tells him patiently.

Mike drops his hand from his eye. It's a little red but he'll heal. Dustin feels no compunction whatsoever.

"Oh."

"Yeah, *oh*."

"Well, what did you want then?"

"I just asked what you were working on!"

Mike picks up his pen from the floor. "Oh. Just working on a new campaign. Nothing special." And just like that, he turns back to his spiral and resumes writing. Dustin and Will exchange baffled looks. Will shrugs one shoulder and Dustin shrugs the other. Dustin opens his mouth to query Mike again but a dictionary slams down on the table in front of him. A couple of the letters on the board bounce from the force of it and Will's last word ("trip") slides right off the board and onto the floor.

Dustin looks up at Lucas with amusement as Lucas jabs his finger at a page. "Metima" is not a fucking word, Dustin!"

"Yes, it is."

"Uh, no, it isn't. Do you see it anywhere?" He waves his hand over the page.

"I never said it was an *English* word."

Lucas shoves the dictionary away from him and a few more words join "trip" on the floor. Will sighs and stands up, stretching. It lasted longer than normal (an impressive fifteen minutes), but the game's over now.

"What fucking language is it, then?"

"Speaking of *language*," Dustin says, twinkling at him, "maybe you should watch *yours*."

"*Dustin*. What the hell kind of word is *métima*?"

Dustin leans back in his chair again, casually lacing his hands behind his head before answering.

"*Ultimate, final, last*," he recites, before adding, "adjective."

Lucas closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. Counts to three. "And in what language does *métima* mean *ultimate, final* or *last*?" he asks

through clenched teeth.

"Oh. You wanted to know what language? You should have said so."

"DUSTIN."

Even Will is glaring at him now, and Will never glares. Dustin finally relents.

"Okay, fine. Jesus. It's Elvish."

Lucas and Will stare at him for a few seconds.

"*Elvish?*" Lucas asks the question like he's never heard the word before.

"Yep. *Elvish*, as in *Lord of the Rings*. As in *Professor J.R.R. Tolkien*. As in-"

"I know who Professor fucking Tolkien is."

"Don't talk about Him like that," Dustin snaps, and Lucas raises his hands in apology.

"Fine. I take it back. But you can't use Elvish in a scrabble game, Dustin. English words only."

All three boys look toward the couch. Mike's still bent over his spiral, hair hanging in his eyes. He doesn't appear to be paying attention to the latest argument.

"Mike."

Apparently he was paying attention, because his reply is immediate. "Sindarin or Quenyan?"

"Quenyan."

"I'll allow it."

Dustin claps his hands in triumph and Lucas scowls at them both.

"Yes! I win!"

"We haven't even *finished* yet!"

"You knocked half of the words off the board. We can't finish. And *I* was in the lead, so that means *I* win."

"Jesus." Lucas glares at him before turning to Mike. "And what the hell does it matter if it's Sindarin or Quenyan?"

"It doesn't. I was just curious."

"Well, *I* don't think it's fair."

"Maybe *you* should brush up on your Elvish, like I have," Dustin retorts, smirking at him.

Will rolls his eyes, gathering up the tiles and shoving them back in the box. Maybe he should just do them all a favor and drop the game in the trash instead of back on the shelf in the garage. He considers it seriously but the squabbling does make for good entertainment, at least, so he returns it to the shelf.

Mike's attention is focused on his writing again. It's not unusual, Mike's always writing something, but they're in the middle of a campaign now and he usually doesn't write a new one while one is still in progress. Dustin leans over his shoulder to take a peek before snorting with laughter. Mike curls his hand protectively over the page, as if Dustin's trying to cheat off of him in class.

"What?" Mike asks defensively.

Dustin can't see anything on the page anymore, because Mike's hunched over it, but he remembers the first two sentences perfectly well.

Make Christmas cookies.

Eat Christmas cookies.

He recites it for the benefit of Lucas and Will. "Seriously? A campaign? That sounds like one weird-ass campaign to me, Michael."

"Shut up."

"Are you hungry, Mike?" Dustin asks him kindly.

Mike gives an irritable huff. "No, I'm not fucking hungry, Dustin. I was just working on...working...well, I'm making a list."

"A grocery list?" Lucas asks, snatching the spiral from him.

"No. Not a grocery list. Just a...you know, a list."

Lucas flips to the first page and skims over the cookie parts. Dustin squeezes in next to Mike on the couch and waits attentively for Lucas to read aloud.

"Wear a Christmas sweater....what the hell? Seriously? Okay... some of these are crossed out. Christmas caroling. Decorate a tree. See the tree lighting ceremony. Build a snowman. Have a snowball fight... sledding. Ice skating. Gingerbread house. Make Christmas ornaments. Make a popcorn garland. Make a Christmas stocking. Christmas movies. White Christmas. Santa Claus." Lucas turns the page, but that's it. Mike's avoiding eye contact, so Dustin and Lucas just stare at him for a few seconds.

"What kind of list is that?" Lucas asks.

Will sighs. "You guys are so dense."

"I am not dense!" Dustin argues immediately.

"*How* am I dense? Am I *supposed* to know what this means?" Lucas waves the spiral at them.

Dustin's eyes light up in comprehension. "Oh. I get it. Yeah, I'm not dense at all."

Will smiles at him before sitting down on Mike's other side. "I like it. I think it's a good idea," Will tells his friend. Mike looks at him.

"You do?"

"What's a good idea?" Lucas asks, aggrieved.

Will rolls his eyes. "It's a list of Christmassy things."

"Uh, yeah, I kind of got that, what with Santa Claus and everything."

"It's for El."

Lucas opens the spiral again. "Oh....I get it." He glances up at Mike. "Why didn't you just tell us?"

"I don't know, I thought maybe it was stupid, but...you know, she's never done any of the regular Christmas stuff. I just thought she should actually get to have a normal Christmas."

"That's not stupid," Dustin says, before adding (apparently without being aware of the irony) "idiot."

Mike grins at him. "Gee, thanks."

"I'm serious. I think it's a good idea. Well, maybe not the Santa part, she's a little old for Santa..." Dustin trails off, because Mike's eyes are wide and he's suddenly looking a little manic. Dustin stares at him in alarm before glancing at Lucas. Lucas shrugs. No help there.

"No! Santa is like, the number one thing she should do."

"It's last on the list, actually."

"Shut up. You know what I mean. Every kid needs to see Santa."

"She already knows Santa doesn't exist. We told her he was just a story."

The manic expression hasn't departed. If anything, it's grown exponentially.

"That doesn't matter! It's still something she never got to do."

"Okay, Jesus. Chill out." Dustin takes the notebook from Lucas and reads over the list again. "These are all doable. Or already done-able, as the case may be. Well, except for the white Christmas part. I don't really think you can control the weather, but it's snowy outside right now, doesn't that count?"

"No."

Dustin rolls his eyes. "It's only a week before Christmas, Mike. I'm sure you'll be fine."

"Technically, El already *had* a white Christmas," Lucas muses.

They all turn to him. "What?"

"Well. She was living in the woods last Christmas, right? And it was snowing. So she already had a white Christmas." They're all staring at him in disbelief and Lucas feels his face heat a little. "What?"

"She was hiding from the Bad Men and freezing to death last year, you moron," Dustin hisses. "I don't think she was really feeling the Christmas spirit."

"Oh." Lucas scratches his arm. "Right. Well, we can't do anything about that one, but we've got time for the rest."

"Santa may be a little difficult-don't look at me like that, Mike. Jesus. Calm the fuck down- It's just that El's a little old for Santa and we're trying to be inconspicuous, right? A 12 or 13 year old sitting on Santa's lap is not exactly what I'd call inconspicuous."

Mike's starting to wilt in disappointment. Even his hair seems to be drooping, Dustin notices wryly. He doesn't argue, because it's true. Hopper will grudgingly allow El out in public, as long as he's close by and she can blend in. She won't blend in if she's in a crowd of kids Holly's age and there's no way to dress her up like they did last year. A wig isn't going to cut it this time.

Mike may be sulking, but Will is suddenly grinning. "I'll handle Santa."

Mike perks up immediately. "You will? How?" Although he has a sneaking suspicion he doesn't need to ask.

Apparently Dustin shares that suspicion. "Shit. Not Scary Santa again?" Will's eyes glint with amusement, but he doesn't answer. Dustin shrugs. "Fine. You deal with that-and good luck, by the way, I don't envy you-but otherwise I think we can probably knock off most of this list today."

Mike shakes his head. "I don't want to cram it all in over one day. I want her to have a normal Christmas."

"I get that, but we're on limited time now, Mike. We can at least do a few of these things today, assuming Hopper will let her out of her cell for a few hours."

"Hopper's at work," Mike says gloomily. "Why do you think she isn't over here?"

"I'll handle that, too," Will says firmly. He checks his watch. It's a little after 1. "I'll meet you guys back here in an hour, and I'll bring El."

"You will?" Mike raises his eyebrows skeptically.

"Yep. You might want to call her and give her a heads-up, though."

"Are you sure about this? I don't want to disappoint her."

"Maybe you should ask her to the Snow Ball, then," Dustin mutters under his breath. Mike turns a little pink but otherwise feigns ignorance.

"You won't," Will's shrugging on his backpack. He grins at Mike until it dawns on him. *Feminine wiles*, or as Dustin would say, *feminine styles*. Joyce can talk Hopper into anything. Will opens the door, waving at his friends. Or the ones that are still in the basement, anyway. Mike's already taking the stairs two at a time to call Eleven.

He dials the number automatically, inching away from Dustin and Lucas, who are suddenly lurking behind him.

"Why are you even calling her?"

Mike shoots him a quick glance before edging away. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. Why are you even calling her? Can't you just do a Vulcan mind-meld or something?"

Dustin's only half-kidding, but he starts laughing as soon as Lucas

snickers. It's just contagious like that, just like yawning or something. He has no control over it. He tries to compromise by giggling while also giving Mike an apologetic look. Mike presses the phone tighter against his ear and tries to concentrate on the ringing.

He's just starting to worry that she's not going to answer when the ringing cuts off and there's silence. He doesn't hang up, even though he can't hear anything, because she usually takes a few seconds before saying anything.

"Hi, Mike."

"Hi! What are you do-wait, how did you know it was me? I didn't even say anything."

Dustin elbows him knowingly and Mike swats him away with his free hand.

"I just knew."

Now Lucas is elbowing him, too, but Mike barely even notices. Lucas and Dustin watch him silently before turning to each other. Lucas bats his eyes coily at Dustin and Dustin pretends to swoon before they both crack up.

Mike doesn't notice that, either.

Will returns, wearing his Christmas sweater and with El in tow. Mike forgot to remind him to bring it but they've got their own kind of telepathy, the kind born from years of friendship. They'll stop by Lucas and Dustin's on the way to the square.

"Hey, El."

"Hi, Mike."

He hugs her, ignoring the eye rolling coming from two of his three friends. He always hugs her when he sees her, and when he leaves her. He doesn't like to think about it, but he knows perfectly well why he does it. Just in case something happens and it's the last time. Again.

He gently disengages, and Dustin moves in for a hug.

"Hey, El," Dustin whispers breathlessly, in imitation of Mike. She stares at him for a few seconds longer than normal before smiling a little at his teasing and hugging him, too.

Lucas pats her on the shoulder but doesn't hug her. He usually doesn't. He's not much of a hugger in general. Eleven watches Mike curiously as he shoves a notebook into his backpack. He opens his mouth to explain but Dustin beats him to it.

"Mike made a list."

Eleven looks back at Mike. "A list?" Eleven keeps a list, too. She doesn't carry it with her anymore, but she used to, when she couldn't see the people on her list whenever she wanted.

"Not that kind of list," Mike says, reading her expression easily and smiling at her.

"Oh. What kind of list?"

"A list of awesome Christmassy things you finally get to do," Dustin answers for him. "We'll explain in the car, we've got a lot of ground to cover today." Without further ado, he starts herding them out the door. Lucas pushes around him to grab his backpack off the couch. "LUCAS. Why didn't you have that ready? MOVE YOUR ASS." Dustin taps his watch impatiently and Mike rolls his eyes at Eleven. She smiles at him before walking back to Joyce's car.

They stand uncertainly around the car. Lucas is mentally calculating how many people can squeeze inside. Not all of them, he'd be willing to bet on it. "Shit. Last time we were in Hopper's car. Are we all going to even fit?"

"We'll fit," Dustin says, with a confidence he doesn't actually feel.

"Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure. El can sit on someone's lap." He gives Mike a pointed look that Mike pretends not to see.

"Eleven isn't sitting on anyone's lap," Joyce interjects from the front seat. "Dustin, you're up front with me." Dustin shrugs and crosses behind the car to slip in through the passenger seat. Joyce is studying the rest of them carefully. "Eleven, you first. In the back. Mike, then Lucas."

"What about me?" Will asks, because there's not quite enough room for him to fit comfortably. Or fit at all, actually. His mom squints, considering him.

And that's how Will ends up sitting in Lucas's lap, both of them ignoring the snickering coming from the passenger seat.

Once they're in the square, Will bolts for the door. He barely waits for his mom to put the car in park. Unfortunately, Lucas also tries to bolt for the door, oblivious to the fact that Will's still in his lap. Will's head bounces off of the door as Lucas shoves him out unceremoniously. Mike slides out more leisurely.

"I'll wait right here. Oh, honey, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Will says, rubbing the top of his head. Lucas pats him on the back apologetically.

Dustin's impatiently shifting his weight from one leg to the other, waiting for Eleven to walk behind the car and join them.

"Okay. Mike. You're on sweater and stocking duty. I'll handle the cookies and Gingerbread houses. Will, you're on arts and crafts. Lucas. Popcorn." Now he's the one with the manic expression, but Mike grabs him before he can dart away.

"Hold on, we're not rushing anything. Nice, normal Christmas stuff, okay?"

Dustin sighs. "We only have a week!"

"A week is plenty of time. Just relax, okay?"

"Fine. But I want my objection on the record."

"Duly noted. Okay, all of us, sweaters first," Mike says, taking the lead

again easily. He reaches for Eleven's hand absently and guides her-guides all of them-inside. "Okay, so the first thing you need for Christmas is a Christmas sweater."

"It's a basic necessity," Dustin adds. He plucks at the hem of his reindeer sweater to illustrate.

"You can only wear it on either Christmas eve or Christmas day," Lucas tells her, spreading his hands and letting her revel in the glory of his Hawaiian Santa sweater. The tiny Hawaiian Santas are drinking margaritas and wearing sunglasses while surfing. It's ghastly, and he's immensely proud of it.

"And you get a new one every year." Eleven glances at Will's sweater. His is green with two candy canes printed on the front. The sleeves are red and white striped.

"Yeah. And then we all vote to see who had the most interesting one."

"He means the ugliest one," Dustin adds helpfully.

"Right. And normally, we'd pick out our sweater separately, and we'd only see them on Christmas Eve, so we can't try to cheat. But we're going to do it differently this year since you need one," Mike finishes.

Eleven stares at his sweater. It's the tamest of them, fuzzy and blue with fat white snowflakes. It just looks like a normal sweater to her. Mike follows her gaze, glancing down at his sweater with a little frown.

"I think she's trying to say that you lose, Mike," Dustin laughs.

"Shut up. Anyway, the sweaters are over here." Mike reaches for her hand again and Eleven smiles at him. "And we'll let you pick it out yourself, *no outside interference*, right guys?"

"Right."

They all agree, but a few seconds later they're sorting through the sweater piles, Mike included. Apparently they're playing a new game, each one trying to offer her a sweater and hoping she'll pick their choice. Eleven barely notices their antics; she's carefully studying

each sweater on the table in front of her. She knows she's not very good with clothes yet, because she can't really tell what's supposed to be *normal*. She's picking it up pretty quickly, though, because she's using the selections of her friends as her guide. Sweaters with animals or lots of colors or flashing lights seem to fall under the category of *not normal*. She finds a couple that she thinks are probably pretty bad, but they're also scratchy and she wants a soft sweater.

"What about this one?" Mike holds up a sweater with an abstract-looking Santa on it. It looks a little like Picasso painted it, he thinks, and a little like Santa's been in a horrible nuclear disaster.

"No fair," Lucas says, assuming that she'll automatically choose whatever Mike picks, but Eleven's already shaking her head and reaching for a red and green sweater. It's soft, and when she holds it up, she can see that it's perfect. It has animals (cats), it's colorful, and the eyes of the kittens light up.

The guys consider it in silence for a few seconds.

"It looks a little demonic," Lucas says, staring at it in disbelief. The flashing red and green eyes of the kittens are almost hypnotic.

"It's *awful*," Will says, "which makes it..."

"Perfect," Mike finishes for him, and it is, even though it puts him in dead last this year.

"More perfect than you even know," Dustin laughs, beaming at her. She looks at him curiously but shifts her attention to Lucas when he elbows Dustin and whispers *shut the hell up, asshole*.

"Okay! Stockings," Will suggests hastily, throwing his sweater pick back onto the pile haphazardly.

"What are stockings?"

"Stockings are these things you put up on the fireplace-"

"-If you have one."

"Right, if you have one, or the wall if you don't. And you put your name on it and your..." Mike hurriedly swallows the "parents" he was about to utter. "...um, people put candy and cool things in it on Christmas Eve."

Eleven doesn't notice his blunder; she seems completely satisfied with his answer and it takes her less than a minute to choose a stocking. It's dark green and soft and very pretty. As soon as she takes it off the rack, Mike grabs an identical one from behind it. Eleven looks at him curiously, but Mike doesn't answer her unasked question, he just tucks the stocking under his arm and heads toward the grocery section. He's not sure if Hopper will bother with anything as homey or traditional as a Christmas stocking, so he'll hang one for her, too.

Just in case.

It doesn't take long to gather the rest of their supplies, although there's a bit of a problem when selecting cookie dough. Lucas suggests just getting one or two traditional kinds (he votes for the sugar cookies with Christmas tree designs and ginger snaps) but when Mike practically twitches in agitation Dustin interprets that to mean that El needs to eat every goddamned Christmas cookie currently on the market. Jesus. Accordingly, he throws one of each into the cart and Lucas doesn't protest. Even he can see that Mike's taking this list thing pretty damned seriously.

Will refuses to sit in anyone's lap on the way back to Mike's, but he's the smallest of the guys so he doesn't get much of a choice. Lucas and Will spend the car ride in resigned silence, both trying to pretend the other doesn't exist. Lucas shows great restraint when they pull in the driveway, allowing Will to bolt first to avoid another injury.

"Cookie time!" Dustin says happily, handing Eleven the sack with the various tubes of dough. "Cookies are essential to Christmas. I'm pretty sure you'd have to cancel Christmas if you didn't have cookies. And fudge."

"He's joking," Will says, because Eleven is watching them all somberly as Mike digs through the cabinets for the cookie sheets.

"Fudge?"

Mike's hand falters away from the cookie sheet because he doesn't miss the hopeful tone in her voice. She really liked his mom's fudge when she was living in the basement last year. He meets Dustin's eyes and Dustin sighs.

"Chill out. I'm on it." He's already reaching for Mrs. Wheeler's recipe book.

"I've never made fudge before," Lucas warns, but it's easy enough following Mrs. Wheeler's meticulous instructions. Especially since they're able to just sit around the table talking while El adds ingredients and mixes telekinetically. It takes less than a few minutes to get it ready, and then Will takes over, removing the cookies from the oven and turning on the heat under the fudge.

While the fudge is cooling in the fridge, the guys and El devour the cookies. Mike watches her select each cookie with a careful kind of consideration that makes Lucas and Dustin avoid each other's eyes to avoid giggling. Poor Mike. Dustin can practically hear him taking mental notes to remember the information in the future. She loves sugar cookies. The ginger snaps are okay. She hates oatmeal. And so on. When Dustin can't contain himself any longer, he hastily shoves the stockings at her along with a tube of glitter paint.

"Now you write your name at the top, right here," he says, tracing his finger over the spot to demonstrate. "Otherwise Santa won't know who the hell you are and he won't leave you anything, he'll just steal from you instead because it pisses him off." Lucas snorts and rolls his eyes, but Dustin doesn't even notice. He's gaping at Eleven. "Did you...did you just roll your eyes? El? Did you just seriously roll your eyes at me?"

She laughs but doesn't answer.

"*Great.* Lucas, you're rubbing off on her. You need to be a better influence in the future, Sinclair." This time all of his friends roll their eyes. "I'm hurt. Seriously, guys." But he smiles as he says it and Eleven grins back at him.

They all watch her curiously as she reaches for the glitter paint. They know her real name now, her birth name, although she's never asked

them to use it and she never says a word when they call her Eleven or El. Mike hasn't wanted to bring the subject up because she hasn't talked about the time she spent in Chicago. Not yet. He only knows her birth name from overhearing Hopper talking to Mrs. Byers. But she doesn't write her birth name. She carefully squeezes the tube and prints her name on each stocking. Eleven.

Eleven caps the tube and sets it down. She glances up from the stocking and meets Mike's eyes. They smile at each other.

"Okay, we'll let those dry and then you can hang one up here next to mine. What do you want to do next? Christmas movies, snowmen, sledding..."

"Fudge."

"I concur," Dustin says.

"The fudge has to cool," Will reminds them.

They watch Christmas movies until the fudge is ready, and then gorge themselves. El's already seen a couple of them, so Dustin selects another classic instead, "in preparation for the next activity." It's *Frosty the Snowman*. El seems to enjoy it and they abandon their fudge as soon as the credits roll. Eleven dons her sweater because it's very cold outside.

Mike tries to guide them into just building one snowman, but the party overrules him. It doesn't matter that Will always wins, they just enjoy competing. And occasionally sabotaging each other. Dustin makes the mistake of leaving his snowman for a few minutes to scrounge for some rocks to make buttons, and Lucas takes the opportunity to behead his snowman. Dustin responds by ripping the arms from Lucas's contribution and impaling it instead while Will howls with laughter. When they're finished and Will can stand up again without giggling, he snaps a couple of pictures of them in front of their creations. He's borrowed Jonathan's camera for the occasion.

Eleven is squinting suspiciously at the line of snowmen.

"It's just a movie," Mike tells her, seeing her expression. "They don't

really come alive or anything."

"Yeah, and if they did, they'd be happy like the one in the movie," Dustin adds.

"I don't know about that. Yours doesn't have a head. I think that would piss him off a little."

"True, but he'd want revenge on you, not me. He'd kick your ass."

"You impaled mine!"

"You started it!"

"The point is, they're just snowmen. Things like that don't happen in real life," Mike says loudly, speaking over the squabbling, because Eleven is still staring at them.

Eleven glances at Mike, smiling a little mischievously. "Demogorgons, demodogs, Upside Down..." she recites, before pointing at herself last, indicating telekinesis. Things that don't happen in real life. Except they have, and they do.

"Shit. Good point," Dustin says. Now they're all squinting suspiciously at the snowmen.

"I'm going to make another head for that one," Lucas says hurriedly, because the headless snowman is starting to seriously creep him out.

"I'll help!" Will's already scooping up a handful of snow.

They all help.

It takes a few days, because they're constantly adding to the list, but they slowly make their way through it. They've gone sledding and ice skating and eaten their weight in Christmas cookies. They have snowball fights and make ornaments for El's tree at home. They make enough popcorn garlands to decorate ten Christmas trees. Some of them are a little blackened ("cajun," Dustin insists) because he goaded El into using her powers to speed up the popping process. It worked, sort of, anyway, although they were scraping popcorn pieces off of Mike's ceiling for an hour afterward.

She's decorated three separate Christmas trees (Will's, Mike's and her own) and attended the annual lighting ceremony in the square. They listen to so much Christmas music that Dustin starts having nightmares about Bing Crosby. Mike looks a little less manic each time they cross off an item and El looks more content than they've ever seen her. Possibly that's the source of Mike's own happiness, or at least that's Dustin's theory.

Finally, only the last item on the list remains. The most important item, at least according to Mike. It's a rite of passage for any normal child, and therefore crucial. Lucas dragged his heels a little but gave in like he always does.

And that's why they're waiting in line at Santa's Village in the square three days before Christmas. They're approximately a foot taller than any of the other attendees. Joyce is waiting with her camera, ostensibly snapping pictures of them in their Christmas finery but in reality keeping an eye on the cantankerous Santa and making sure he doesn't bolt. Santa's currently lecturing a four year old and insisting that she doesn't actually need any new toys this year because she's probably going to break them anyway. Joyce shakes her head warningly and Santa sighs before handing the girl a candy cane and promising her he'll think about it.

"At least he isn't smoking this year," Dustin mutters under his breath to Lucas as they shuffle forward in line. Lucas stifles a laugh.

"Yet, you mean."

Dustin considers Scary Santa very carefully before nodding. Santa looks about five seconds away from lighting one up.

"I'll bet you my X-Men 134 to your 125 that he sets his beard on fire again before we're done."

"Hell no."

"Guys," Mike hisses warningly, and they shut up. Eleven doesn't know the identity of Santa, or at least that's the plan. It doesn't really matter, in a way, because they've all told her Santa isn't real and it's just a guy in a costume. It's just fun for kids, and she knows that. But

it does matter; somehow, it seems necessary for her to have that magical experience that they've all had. And that means that Santa's identity has to be a secret. The beard obscures his identity but the jig will definitely be up if he starts smoking.

"Too bad Jonathan couldn't do it this year," Lucas whispers, before Mike hisses at him again and he falls silent. Dustin nods morosely. Jonathan's always a good Santa, but it's not really a fair competition. Anyone would make a better Santa than Hopper, and they can all see that Hopper's nearly out of patience. There are only a couple of kids in front of them now but Dustin's not sure Hopper can hold out much longer.

Santa meets Dustin's eyes over the heads of the little kids in front of him and scowls. Dustin waves cheerily, and that seems to send him over the edge. A little boy approaches Santa but Hopper holds out a hand to stop him.

"Beat it, kid. The elves are on strike. Better luck next year."

The kid is near tears and his parents are glaring. Santa ignores them both and pats his pockets before remembering that he's temporarily smoke-free.

"*Jesus...Christ*," Dustin breathes slowly, and Mike covers his face with his hands. Will raises his eyebrows at his mom and she swoops in immediately, handing the kid a candy cane and leading him by the hand back to Santa. Santa grumbles a bit but acquiesces.

Will and Mike exchange a look and both begin talking, hoping to distract El from the scene in front of them.

"So anyway, you just sit in his lap and tell him what you want for Christmas," Mike says loudly.

"And you get your picture taken, and then you get a candy cane. Easy-peasy," Will adds, thinking of Bob and smiling a little.

"It's helpful if you tell other people what you want, too, since Santa doesn't actually exist," Lucas reminds her.

"I know," El says, smiling at him.

"Or...*does he?*" Dustin asks dramatically, and she rolls her eyes. Twice in one week. He feels absurdly proud of her. "Just remember, if you don't leave food out for him, he'll totally ransack your house and eat everything in sight. He's kind of an asshole like that."

They break into a fit of giggling and Will leans too hard on the candy cane fence. A piece snaps off and Will tumbles to the ground on top of it. Howling, Mike pulls him to his feet.

"MOVE IT. LET'S GO! I DON'T HAVE ALL DAY!" Santa bellows, and they sober immediately.

"See? Total asshole," Dustin whispers, and El giggles again.

It's their turn now. The plan is for the guys to step aside and let El have her rite of passage, but Dustin can't resist. To hell with the plan. He holds out a hand, stopping Eleven in her tracks.

"I'll show you how it's done," Dustin says gleefully.

"*Dustin.*"

"What? She looks nervous. You're nervous, right El?"

"No."

"You're totally nervous. It's fine. I get it. I'll go first to show you it's okay." Eleven laughs and steps back. Dustin approaches Santa triumphantly and Santa glares at him. Dustin smiles wide enough for both of them and attempts to sit in Santa's lap. Santa shoves him away.

"Don't even think about it."

"Ssh. She'll hear you. You don't want her to hear you, right?" Santa doesn't answer, not verbally, anyway. Dustin takes that as a good sign. "Don't you want to lend this an air of verisimilitude?" Santa stares at him in disbelief. Dustin takes advantage of the silence to make himself comfortable on Hopper's knee. "Just go with it," he advises.

Hopper sighs. "What do you want, little boy?" he asks in a loud,

robotic voice, for the benefit of the girl waiting in line. The girl that's almost worth this nightmare. Joyce snaps a picture and he grimaces. "*Hurry the hell up*," he hisses, but Dustin ignores him.

"Well, Santa. I'm glad you asked. Let's see...I'd like the new *X-Men* comics...hmm. Maybe a pony? I don't really have the space for a pony so maybe a bigger house with some acreage? So he or she can graze. And a barn. For the pony, obviously. Maybe two ponies, actually, so the first one doesn't get lonely. And, um...maybe a new bike. I already have one, but it wouldn't hurt to have another, you know. Like a back-up bike, really. Oh! And I'd like to see a decent *Lord of the Rings* movie. None of that cartoon bullshit. Can you swing that? Of course you can. You have all those Elves. I'm sure you guys could make a few calls...." Dustin drones on happily until Hopper's right eye starts twitching.

Lucas and Will have stepped out of line. They're holding each other upright because they're both laughing too hard to stand up on their own. Mike's grinning, watching Eleven's face as she observes Dustin in all his glory.

"*Your own Heathkit Hamshack!*" Lucas calls, cupping his hands over his mouth and Dustin nods, pleased.

"Yes. Thank you, Lucas. I'd also like my own Heathkit Hamshack. It reaches all the way to Australia, you know. Actually a lot further, if you just...enhance it a little. Anyway..."

Feeling Mike's gaze, Eleven turns her face toward his. They grin at each other and she feels *light*, somehow. Lighter than she's ever felt. It takes her a few seconds to realize the feeling means that she's happy. She never knew it was possible to feel this happy, or that she'd ever deserve to feel this way. And each day, if it's possible, she feels happier than the day before. She feels normal, and she knows it's because of them. Because of her friends, the best friends anyone could ever ask for. And because of Mike, who is more than a friend. Mike, who cared enough to write a list and give her the perfect Christmas. For the first time in her life, she feels lucky. Incredibly lucky that she has them in her life, all of the people on her own list.

She realizes she's been staring at him when he turns pink. It's a nice

shade of pink. She likes it a lot. "Thank you," she says quietly, emphatically, and watches the pink darken to red.

You're welcome.

She hears him clearly, but he hasn't opened his mouth. He doesn't have to. She can hear him, anyway. They smile at each other again until Dustin hops down and grabs a couple of candy canes.

"Okay, you're up!" Dustin calls to El, before waving at Santa. Santa restrains from making a slightly more rude hand gesture than a wave. Mike doesn't join the guys, he steps a few feet away from the line while still remaining close to El. Just in case.

Eleven gingerly perches on Santa's knee and waits expectantly.

"What's your name, little girl?" Hopper's using his kindest voice, which is pretty kind and a far cry from his usual one.

Eleven hesitates briefly. *Eleven? Jane? Eleanor?* She has a lot of names, and she isn't sure which one is appropriate with a stranger. She settles for saying, "El," since that could be the nickname for two of her names.

"And have you been a good girl this year?"

She hesitates again. She's broken the *don't be stupid* rules. She's fought with Hopper. She ran away. But she didn't kill the Bad Man with her sister, and she could have killed him. Part of her wanted to. But she came home instead. She saved her friends.

"Yes."

"I know you have," Santa tells her seriously, and his voice sounds familiar. Very familiar. She twists around to look at his face but it's obscured by the beard.

"And what do you want for Christmas?"

Another hesitation as Eleven considers the question with the gravity it deserves. She smiles at Santa, who isn't really Santa, but someone from her list. Someone who gave her a home. She smiles at Joyce,

who's taking as many pictures as Jonathan usually does. She smiles at Lucas, Dustin, and Will as they wave and eat their candy canes. Her friends. And she saves her biggest smile for Mike, waiting nearby in case she needs him. Mike, who waited for her for 353 days, and would have waited forever.

Never taking her eyes off Mike, she twists around to whisper something in Santa's ear. She whispers it quietly, but Mike hears her, anyway. Just not with his ears.

I already have everything I want.

It's Christmas Eve and Eleven is home alone. Hopper's going to be working late, or at least working past her usual bedtime. She doesn't mind, because it means he'll be off work tomorrow. He's promised. And he's been working very hard on keeping his promises lately. And she's been busy this evening, anyway. She's made him a stocking and hung it next to hers before filling it with candy. She wanted to fill it with cigarettes since he really likes those but Mike gently dissuaded her.

And now it's 7:40, and she's talking to Mike. She always talks to Mike at 7:40. Sometimes they talk over the phone, but more often they talk via super-comm, since she can boost the signal. They chat easily, even though they saw each other a few hours ago. Chatting deviates into listening to Mike read a story. They're halfway through *Fellowship of the Ring* but Mike's reading a different story tonight. *The Gift of the Magi*. It's something he read in his English class, and it's written by someone with the odd name of Oh Henry. She likes the story immediately, because she also has an unusual name. She feels strangely protective of Oh Henry and listens very carefully.

"Did you like that? I thought it was kind of cool. We had to read a couple of O. Henry's short stories but I liked that one the most. Over."

"Yes. I liked it. A lot." She pauses before ending the communication the official way. She doesn't really like ending each sentence that way. She likes to imagine Mike's in the same room with her when they talk, and it's hard to imagine that when they keep saying "over."

Possibly Mike realizes this, because he omits it with his next

question. "More than *Lord of the Rings*?"

"No. I like the Hobbits. And the songs." Mike didn't say it, so she doesn't, either.

"Yeah, I do, too. We'll get back to that tomorrow night if you want."

"Okay. We're at the council of Elrond part."

"I know, I've got it bookmarked."

"Are the rest of the Hobbits going to Mordor, too?" She doesn't like to think of Frodo making his way to Mordor (which Mike says is like the Upside Down, but with more monsters. And fire) without his friends. She knows how lonely he would be without them.

"I'm not going to tell you. We'll get there."

Eleven doesn't say anything for a long moment and Mike laughs. "Yeah. The Hobbits are going, too. Or at least-well. Um. Frodo will have company, okay?" Eleven tries to be content with that answer, even though it actually makes her more curious.

She opens her mouth to ask another question but Mike suddenly yells "OKAY! I'm going!" and she jumps, startled. "Sorry. That's my mom. I've got to go to bed."

Eleven looks at her watch-Mike's watch-and sees that it's 10:00. It's later than she thought, and her nose is bleeding from boosting the signal for hours.

"Okay."

"Don't forget to set out the cookies and milk."

"You said Santa isn't real."

"He's not, but you do it anyway."

"Why?"

"Uh. I don't really know. You just do. I mean, we still do it, Nancy

and me. And Holly. It's just a tradition."

She's learned a lot about traditions this year. She likes traditions a lot, because they mean that she'll get to enjoy them next year, too. And the year after that. They're very *normal*. And they make her feel *normal*, too.

"Okay. I will."

"All right. I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

"Yes. Christmas dinner tomorrow night." Eleven hears more muffled yelling. Mike's mom suddenly sounds a lot like Hopper, which means she sounds cranky. Eleven's had a lot of experience with crankiness so she recognizes it immediately. Mike must hear the anger, too, because he sighs.

"Good night, El."

They *never* say goodbye, not after the last time. Neither one of them has ever brought it up, but they don't need to. They both understand. It's not a word they can ever use with each other.

"Good night, Mike."

Eleven places the super-comm on the bed. She likes to keep it close by, even while she's sleeping. Mike's never called her after saying good night, but he might. Someday.

Eleven checks the locks on the front door (there are six of them, and they're all locked) before turning off the TV. Hopper won't be home until early in the morning, so he'll let himself in without using their secret knock. She doesn't mind being alone at night, because she's used to it. And she knows he'll always come home, as soon as he can.

Eleven straightens their stockings, smiling a little. She knows why Mike insisted on two, but she thinks he doesn't have anything to worry about. Hopper won't forget. Although she likes the idea of her stocking hanging in Mike's basement, right next to her fort. Her *other* home.

Still smiling, she walks into the tiny kitchen and grabs a plate. She

still has an array of Christmas cookies from which to choose. They all do. Dustin says they'll still be eating them next Christmas, but she's pretty sure he's kidding. She debates with herself for a few seconds. Which cookies should she leave for Santa? Since he isn't actually real, she doesn't see a problem leaving the oatmeal cookies. The ones she likes the least. She leaves a stack of them on the plate, and feels a little guilty. The oatmeal cookies aren't very good at all, at least in her opinion. She grudgingly adds a small piece of fudge, just in case. She trusts Mike and her friends when they tell her Santa isn't real, but stranger things have happened. If he is real, she should leave him something better than oatmeal unless she wants him ransacking her house. Dustin's mentioned that several times, so it's best to be cautious. And if he isn't real, that's even better, because she can eat the fudge herself tomorrow.

Satisfied, Eleven opens the fridge to leave the requisite glass of milk. Milk is essential for Santa's travels, according to Dustin. Like Eggos. Although Eggos are a lot better than milk. She doesn't like milk very much, which is why she isn't really surprised to find that the fridge is completely barren of milk. And juice. And soda. Hopper's not very good at grocery shopping yet, because the fridge is actually pretty empty of everything. It looks like mythical Santa will be drinking water. She checks the vegetable drawers on the off chance of finding a soda, at least, and finds several cans of Schlitz beer. She removes one and looks at it thoughtfully. Hopper likes beer a lot. He doesn't drink as much as he used to, according to Mike, but he still likes it. A lot of people like beer. Maybe it tastes better than milk. Shrugging slightly, she grabs two of the cans and leaves them next to the plate of cookies. She pauses briefly, and then considerably opens both of the cans for him. When her offering is ready, she rips a sheet of paper from the pad on the fridge.

She feels a little silly writing a letter to someone who doesn't exist, but it's tradition, and she likes tradition. And Mike does it. She thinks for a few seconds before scrawling a brief note, and leaves it on the plate of cookies.

Santa,

Thank you for coming over. Here are some cookies. If you need more food, please don't eat my Eggos. I only have two and they are for

breakfast.

I'm sorry about the beer. I hope you like it. I didn't have milk.

Eleven

She reads the note again, feeling a little guilty. Maybe she should share her Eggos, because she knows what it's like to be hungry, but Santa isn't real. And if he is real, he eats at every house in the world, anyway. Dustin said so. That's why he's so fat. She stares at the note for a long time. It still feels wrong, somehow, to not be willing to share. She finally decides on a compromise. Halfway happy. She adds another line after her name.

If you are really hungry, you can have more fudge. It's in the cabinet.

That's better. She tucks the note between the plate and the beer and gets ready for bed.

Eleven's eyes snap open, staring blankly into the darkness. She stays very still, thinking hard. She's awake, but she's not sure why she's awake. She didn't have a bad dream and she's still very tired, so it's not morning yet. Besides, it's still dark. She wouldn't be able to see anything at all if she didn't have a *nightlight*.

Why is she awake?

But as soon as she asks herself the question, the answer becomes apparent. She hears a crash coming from outside her room. Someone is inside. Someone very noisy. Eleven sits up quietly and checks her watch. It's 12:14, which is too early for Hopper. He's not supposed to be home until much later, and he never comes home earlier than expected.

Eleven tucks her hair behind her ears, thinking quickly. Not Hopper. That leaves two options. The Bad Men is the first option, but why would they be in the kitchen or living room, and not in her room? And why would they be so noisy? That's not like them at all.

The other option is slightly better. *Santa*. Maybe her friends are wrong. That would explain the noise. He didn't like the beer and the oatmeal cookies. Or maybe he's angry because she wouldn't let him

have any Eggos. Either way, now he's robbing them.

She slides out of bed as quietly as possible and cracks open the door. She peeks into the hallway, but it's dark. None of the ceiling lights are on, just a lamp in the kitchen. The kitchen. That reinforces the Santa theory. Silently, she makes her way down the hall and into the kitchen. Someone is rooting around inside the freezer. She can't see his face, because it's blocked by the freezer door. She can't see his face, but she does see something else. The arm not digging in the freezer is holding a box of Eggos. *Her* Eggos. The Eggos she asked him not to eat.

She doesn't think twice.

The box of Eggos is ripped from the man's hand and lands on the counter. The man jerks, startled, but she doesn't give him any time to recover. She pushes with her mind and the man's feet fly out from under him. His head smacks against the cabinet as he falls over backward.

She stalks further into the room. She's careful to keep her attention focused, but also leashed. She doesn't want to hurt him. She just wants him to leave. Without her stuff.

"Shit! Ah, *fuck*! Goddamn it!"

Eleven stares at the prone form on the floor in front of her. Dustin never said anything about a cursing Santa. She's pretty sure she would have remembered that. Without turning her gaze from the man, she flicks the light switch with her mind. The room is flooded with light and she relaxes. It's not Santa.

Hopper squints up at her from the floor, rubbing the back of his head.

"*Jesus*. What the hell was that for? I'm not even late! I'm early!"

Eleven feels a tiny amount of remorse, because she hurt him. Although what did he expect? He came home early and was making a lot of noise. It's not really her fault, is it? She extends a hand and helps Hopper to his feet.

"I thought you were Santa."

Hopper gapes at her, rubbing his hand over his stubble. "Um. Okay. I'm not sure they told you the story right. You don't have to kick Santa's ass."

"Dustin said Santa steals things if you don't feed him enough."

Hopper mutters something under his breath that she doesn't quite hear. "Ah. Well, then you did an excellent job of stopping any attempted robbery. Maybe you should be the Chief."

Eleven stretches her hand to his head, but she can't quite reach. "How's your head?"

"I've had worse."

"I'm sorry." And she is, although she still thinks Hopper should have done the secret knock.

"It's okay, kid. I'll live."

Eleven's gaze falls to the bags on the floor. Hopper's brought groceries, if candy counts as groceries.

"That's for your stocking. You aren't supposed to see it yet."

Maybe she isn't supposed to, but she's already opened the nearest bag and is examining the contents. She closes the bag when he speaks and hands it back to him.

"I saw."

"I noticed."

Eleven glances away from the bag, back to the box of Eggos.

"Are you hungry?" She doesn't mind sharing one of her Eggos with Hopper. And it would technically be breakfast, because she was asleep. And now she isn't.

Hopper reaches for the Eggos and shakes the box. She can hear more than two Eggos moving around inside, and she smiles. "Got a couple more boxes while I was on break," Hopper says, shoving them into

the freezer.

"Thank you."

"Merry Christmas," Hopper says, and Eleven glances at her watch again. He's right. It's now 12:23, and it's officially Christmas.

"Merry Christmas," she replies, and Hopper smiles.

"Okay, back to bed. We'll celebrate when we wake up, okay?"

She nods, following him into the living room. He dumps the candy into her stocking and motions for her to turn around. He still needs to empty the other bag, the one she didn't open. She turns around and waits.

"You made one for me?"

Eleven turns to face him and sees him staring at their stockings. She chose a red one for him, since red and green are Christmas colors. She nods.

"Thanks, kid."

Hopper watches her for a second before removing both of the stockings from their hooks. "I guess it wouldn't hurt to open these now, if you want."

"Okay," she says, taking her stocking from him and sitting on the couch. She tucks her feet underneath her because they're cold. Hopper sits next to her and they both empty their stockings onto the coffee table.

"How many can we eat? How many calories?"

She asks the question with a little smile, because Hopper's always joking about getting fat from too much junk food.

Hopper stretches an arm across the couch behind her and ruffles her hair until she pulls away. "Well. Christmas is special, because calories don't exist on Christmas. You can eat whatever you want from midnight until the day after. That also applies to other holidays.

Thanksgiving, Valentine's day, the works."

"You can?"

Hopper's forgotten how literal she is. "Well, okay, that's not technically true. It still counts, but people don't really care on those days. So we won't care, either. All right?" That sounds good to Eleven. She's already eaten four Reese's Pieces.

When they've eaten as much candy as they can, they sit quietly together, watching the tree. It doesn't seem worth it to go back to bed and then have to wake up again in order to open the presents. Apparently Hopper feels the same, because he shrugs and grabs the nearest one.

"Here, you can open one tonight."

And she does. She also opens the next one that he gives her, and the one after that. And also the ones after *that* one, until they've unwrapped everything and the floor is littered with paper.

"It is technically Christmas," Hopper says thoughtfully.

"It is."

They grin at each other until Hopper yawns. It's a huge yawn, and seems to stretch his face out completely. She laughs and he rolls his eyes. "Yeah, yeah. Hilarious. Wait until you turn 20, kid, and let's see how much energy you have then. Bedtime, okay? And I may still have a Santa gift for you. Maybe."

"Okay. Good night."

"Night, kid."

She's almost back to her room when she hears his voice from the kitchen.

"Is that my beer? What were you doing with my beer?" He sounds a little cranky again so she pauses, one hand on her door.

"It's for Santa."

There's a long pause, then a chuckle. "Santa has good taste."

Eleven smiles, turning off the light and climbing back into bed. She moves the super-comm to one side, keeping it close. She's tempted to call Mike to tell him she's completed the last item on his list but she'll see him tomorrow. Technically, she'll see him later today. The thought makes her smile and it's incentive enough to close her eyes and go back to sleep.